

I. Introduction

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B. The conduct of my research was very in depth. I used the most current books and numerous military and civilian internet sites to draw my conclusions.

II. Evolution of the Noncommissioned Officer and the Noncommissioned Officer roles in each of the major eras from Biblical times to the Korean War.

- A. Evolution from Biblical Times and Roman Legions.
- B. Evolution of the NCO from Continental Europe (1775-1860).
- C. Revolutionary War (1779-1783) and the Militia.
- D. War of 1812-1815 and the Mexican War (1846-1848).
- E. Civil War (1861-1865).
- F. American Expansion (1898-1902).
- G. World War I (1917-1918).
- H. World War II (1941-1945) and Korea (1950-1953).

III. Closing

A. Question and Answer Period

B. Summary and Concluding Statement

Evolution of the Noncommissioned Officer

“The backbone of the Army is the noncommissioned man!”¹ This quote by Rudyard Kipling in 1896 from the poem “The ‘eathen” is a sentiment shared by U.S. military members and American citizens alike. What it means is that while officers are most often perceived as the *planners*, the noncommissioned officers are the *doers*. The noncommissioned officer makes things happen, takes care of routine daily business, and takes care of soldiers. The evolution of the noncommissioned officer is one that can be traced back to biblical times, and is one that has made great strides and in earning respectability.

In the Old Testament of the Bible several references are made to the phrase, “captains of tens and hundreds²”. In context, this refers to the noncommissioned officer (NCO). In the New Testament, one will find the title “serjeant”, when referring to the Roman Army. The Roman Army had an NCO force. The Senior NCO supervised recruit training and led his 100-man unit in combat. The NCO promotion system was normally appointments primarily based on patronage and special skills such as mason and metal workers. Seniority played a secondary role. Nonetheless, a career path, rank structure, and a special skills program existed. The Roman Army was very modern with drills, uniform, organization, and command structure.

During the European medieval period around the mid-thirteenth century, sergeants were ranked behind the Knight in hierarchy. The title “sergeant” is a Latin

¹ Ernest F. Fisher, JR. Guardians of the Republic. New York, 1994. Page 3

² The Noncommissioned Officer Corps on Training, Cohesion, and Combat. Page 32

term meaning servant, and the NCO duty during this particular period was to be just that – a servant³. By the late 15th century and well into the 16th century, however, NCOs began to take on larger roles in the Prussian, French, and British Armies. The NCOs were responsible for providing instructions and for the drilling of soldiers as well as camp discipline. Basically, the NCO was the only authority figure that had any interaction with the soldiers. In the 17th century, the NCOs gained respect for courageous fighting against the enemy and for the care provided to their soldiers. The NCOs earned the honored responsibility to instruct the “Drummes and Phifes”.

In the beginning days of the American Revolution, the NCOs duty and responsibility barely existed.⁴ The American NCO had adopted the European structure that had been applied to Prussian, French, and British Armies. However, it was the American Militia that was involved in the first fights between Colonists and the British. The Militia, much like the Roman citizen militia, consisted of nearly every male-available body of military age. All members were expected to have their own arms and attend musters.⁵ Initially, the Militia was a relatively unstructured group that would fight Indians or any European power that started trouble. The need for structure is how the NCO applied its European roots and soon a structured force was being formed. The Militia formed into squads of roughly twenty men with each squad having an NCO. At the time, the primary NCO responsibility was to rotate guard duty and organize campaigns with other Militia organizations.

³ Ernest F. Fisher, JR. Guardians of the Republic. New York, 1994. Page 3

⁴ L.R. Arms. A Short History of the NCO. Page 1

⁵ Arnold G. Fisher JR. Robert K. Wright. Page 3

Over the next two years, our continental Army was forming and had developed regiments with its own staff and eight companies. Four Staff NCOs came into existence: a Sergeant Major, a Quartermaster Sergeant, and two Musicians.⁶ NCO duties and responsibilities were standardized after the Inspector General Baron Von Steuben wrote the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States in 1779. The two major NCO roles in the American Revolution were to keep the long ranks steady to maintain volley fire discipline and to serve as a covering Sergeant who stood in the second rank behind the company officer. The NCO was also responsible for protecting the commander and was expected to take command of the unit if he fell. The Corporal would perform a similar function in protecting the junior officer who carried the colors.

After the War of 1812, the American NCO began to take on other duties. Although NCOs were still recognized as disciplinarians, they were performing missions that included enforcing treaties with the Great Plains Indians, protecting trading caravans, and providing safe passage along numerous routes. Their experience was invaluable as the NCO actually had a direct influence on training new recruits on these missions. Most fights with the Indians were fairly small skirmishes that involved small unit NCO leadership. During the Mexican War, the NCO role expanded as they were now placed in charge of the care and placement of artillery pieces. After the war, the NCO was charged with providing security for Topographical Engineers and security during the great Gold Rush where they engaged in 22 separate Indian wars.⁷

⁶ L.R. Arms. A Short History of the NCO. Page 1

⁷ Arnold G. Fisher JR. Robert K. Wright. The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989. Page 7 and 8.

During the Civil War, new tactics had an immediate impact on the NCO. NCOs now led scouting and skirmish parties in order to locate the enemy. NCOs led patrols that would last several weeks in length and would encompass hundreds of miles. The NCO now stood in the second rank and was in charge of controlling the movement. The NCO, normally the First Sergeant, was now the Color Bearer. This was a very significant role as soldiers would dress on the Colors during battles. Throughout the Civil War, NCOs continued to take charge of units when company officers fell. During the Civil War the NCO, with a few exceptions, remained loyal to the Union while a third of the Officers joined the Confederacy.

When the Battleship Maine blew up in Havana Harbor in 1898, war broke out.⁸ Three American Divisions were sent in what was the start of the American Overseas Expansion. Not only did soldiers lose their lives in battle, but to disease as well. Yellow fever and typhoid claimed the lives of many American Army soldiers. After the war ended, it was the NCO who took charge tightening sanitation rules. The result of strict NCO enforcement ensured this disastrous outbreak never occurred again. Once again, the NCOs proved their leadership ability. In the Philippines and Samoa, small unit skirmishes gave NCOs opportunity to prove their skills. Inexperienced soldiers relied heavily on the trained and experienced NCO.⁹ Afterwards, the NCO took on nontraditional civic roles as teachers and promoting literacy in local schools. Working to eliminate disease was another civic role of the NCO.

⁸ Arnold G. Fisher JR. Robert K. Wright. The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989. Page 10.

⁹ The Noncommissioned Officer Corps on Training, Cohesion, and Combat Page 33.

The NCO trained four million new recruits in World War I. One million of those soldiers were sent overseas.¹⁰ During actual combat, NCOs proved themselves through their technical skills and leadership throughout the awful trench warfare environment. Many outstanding NCOs were commissioned to compensate the loss of company officers. After WWI, Congress reorganized the NCO ranks to literally establish new ranks. The NCO ranks were now: Master Sergeant, Technical Sergeant, Staff Sergeant, Sergeant, and Corporal.

During the World War II and the Korean War years, basic training focused on the NCO conducting hands-on training for the new recruits. On the front lines in Europe small unit leadership performed superbly in countless engagements. In Korea, NCOs were gaining recognition as leaders as well. The NCO participated significantly in every outstanding performance. The Historian, S.L.A Marshall wrote, “strengthening the prestige of the upper bracket of NCOs within the combat arms contributed more directly than all else to an uplift of the fighting power of the Army”¹¹. NCO success in Korea was largely due to the combat experience from WWII.

The evolution of the NCO from biblical times to the Korean War has come a long way in achieving responsibility and respect. The effectiveness of many great armies depended heavily upon their NCOs, who drilled and trained their soldiers and steadied their ranks on the day of battle.

¹⁰ L.R. Arms. A Short History of the NCO. Page 39.

¹¹ Arnold G. Fisher JR. Robert K. Wright. The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989. Page 16 and 17.

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